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ABSTRACT

Death education is presently viewed as an ongoing process throughout the life cycle, with the responsibility for it being shared by home, church, other community agencies, and the schools. Goals for a death education program include the following: to inform children of basic facts concerning the multidimensional aspects of death and dying; to enable individuals to be informed consumers of medical and funeral services; and to improve quality of life by considering personal values and priorities. Death education programs in elementary and secondary schools are not widespread, but they are increasing; college programs proliferated during the 1970's. The content in death education programs ranges from discussion of the death of a pet in kindergarten to study of human death, burial, and bereavement in the upper grades. Death education, by its very nature, lends itself to a multidisciplinary approach. For example, students in the middle schools examine life cycles in nature; the human life cycle; and the biological, social-cultural, economic, and legal aspects of death. Content in high school and college programs is quite similar, with differences primarily in depth of treatment at the college level. Content at the college level covers such areas as suicide and dealing with dying. Death education programs lack a standardized set of concepts, terminology, and guidelines and have no established place in the curriculum. A number of concerns must be dealt with. For example, what teaching techniques and materials are appropriate for death education? Research in implementing death education into schools and college programs is needed. (A bibliography is included which lists print materials and audiovisual materials on the topic of death.) (Author/NE)

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Death Education: A Concern for the Living

By A. Barbara Gibson
Polly C. Roberts
and
Thomas J. Buttery

Fastback 173

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Barbara Gibson received her A.B. from Judson College, M.Ed. from University of North Carolina, and Ed.S. and Ed.D. from University of Georgia. She has served as coordinator of a continuous progress school, and was assistant professor at Brenau College. Currently, she is fourth-grade teacher at Mt. Pleasant Academy, Charleston, S.C., where she was named the 1980-81 Teacher of the Year.

Polly Roberts received her B.S. degree from University of North Carolina, M.A. from Columbia University, and Ph.D. from University of North Carolina. She has taught at Limestone College, at Judson College, and at Macon Junior College. She was Calloway Professor of Physical Education at Brenau College. Currently, she is teaching seventh- and eighth-grade health and science in the Charleston County School, Charleston, S.C.

Thomas Buttery received his B.A. degree from Kean College, and M.S. Rec., M.S.Ed., and Ed.D. from Indiana University. He has taught in public schools and was associate professor at the University of Georgia. He is a member of the Association of Teacher Educators and serves on its National Research Committee. He is an editor of *American Middle School Education*. Currently, he is a professor at Northeast Louisiana University. He was the 1981-82 recipient of the Association of Teacher Educators' Distinguished Research Award in Teacher Education.

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Introduction

Solomon Grundy,
Born on Monday,
Christened on Tuesday,
Married on Wednesday,
Took ill on Thursday,
Worse on Friday,
Died on Saturday,
Buried on Sunday,
This is the end
of Solomon Grundy.

—*Anonymous*

In this familiar children's verse, Monday through Saturday depicts the human life cycle. Monday (birth) has been the occasion for joy and celebration throughout the generations. Until recently, Saturday (death) has been avoided or denied in our society. We disguise the reality of death with euphemisms. A person does not die but "passes away," "goes on a long journey," or "meets his Maker." Death and dying are not mentioned, especially in front of children.

However, in the decade of the Seventies the subject of death has moved from the shadow of cultural taboo into the light of public discussion. Books, articles, television programs, and other types of media coverage are devoted to the subject. Medical professionals, clergy, and educators are now openly discussing and addressing the issues of death and dying. Such support organizations as Make Today Count are in-

creasing, and prominent persons who are terminally ill are "going public." The hospice movement, which provides hospital and home-care programs for terminally-ill patients, is growing across the country. Such developments clearly indicate that death and dying are no longer taboo topics.

What accounts for this change in attitude about death and dying? H. Feifel has suggested three factors: 1) Recent medical advances are altering our traditional definitions of death. With current technology, life support systems can keep persons alive for extended periods of time. "Pulling the plug" has become one of the pressing ethical issues of modern medicine. 2) With the mobility of modern society, persons tend to become alienated from traditional institutions; and community support systems no longer work. Historically, concern about death becomes more acute during periods of social disorganization. 3) For many there is a growing pessimism about the future of humanity because of the possibility of world annihilation through thermonuclear warfare.

On a societal level these three factors, no doubt, do account for some of the current concern about death and dying. However, on a personal level, interest in deliberate educational programs on death has grown out of a *concern for the living*; hence the subtitle of this fastback.

Writers in the field of death education stress that by sharing feelings about death, one becomes able to put personal fears and anxieties in perspective. Through discussion with others one learns how to comfort the dying and the bereaved. Also, one learns to accept the reality of the aging process and the importance of a more caring environment for the elderly. Perhaps most important of all, dealing openly with death has the potential for improving the quality of life. Life consists of a constant ebb and flow, of death and renewal. By accepting this concept, one comes to experience a new quality of living. As G. E. LaMone puts it:

We become more aware, more grateful, more available to all life. We no longer postpone our thank-you notes. We want to sing all the songs we know while there is time, to miss nothing that life permits. In other words, we stop measuring our days by their quantity and begin to measure them by their quality. We become reconciled to one or the deepest

insights in all the world's religions—that the basic question of life must not be “How long are you going to live?” but “How wide are you going to live?” How wide will be your appreciation, how expansive your concern and your charity.

In this fastback the authors survey the scope of death education, particularly as it relates to the school curriculum. Basic questions are raised and answered, sample programs cited, cautions and concerns underscored, and the future of death education explored.

Death Education—An Ongoing Process

Death education is the ongoing process of exploring factors pertaining to death and dying and their relationship to the living. R. T. Kurlychek defines it as a

... process concerned with increasing an individual's awareness of the part that death plays in that person's life and with providing structures to assist the student in examining these realities and integrating them into his or her life (p. 44).

Ideally, death education should begin in childhood and continue through maturity to senescence, because the meaning of death undergoes constant reevaluation and modification over a lifetime. The intent of death education is not to become preoccupied with death but rather to foster a greater sensitivity to life.

Death education is for the living—students, teachers, parents, and others. While some concepts about death develop through the course of everyday life, a well-designed death education curriculum can help children and youth come to understand and accept the idea of death in the cycle of life.

Teaching positive attitudes about death requires the combined efforts of the family, the church, and the schools, with supportive assistance from medical personnel, safety officers, attorneys, social workers, and others of the helping professions.

Home and Family

The earliest opportunities to direct and mold children's attitudes and understandings about death and dying occur in the home and

family setting. Whether deliberate or not, death education inevitably occurs in the home. Aunt Sue is in a rest home; death is imminent. A funeral is held for a neighbor. The family dog is hit and killed by an automobile. Whether events such as these are openly discussed or avoided, children are aware of change, concern, and feelings. When such events are discussed openly and the child's questions are answered honestly and calmly, the child is receiving a positive type of death education in the home.

The following are some general suggestions for parents and others to consider when dealing with the subject of death with children.

1. First it is important for adults to examine their own concepts, fears, and feelings regarding death. There are a number of books and articles that are helpful for this purpose (see References). Also, seminars and college classes as well as professional personnel are available. With a sound cognitive and emotional base, adults can cope honestly with their own feelings and, in turn, can give assurance to children when the subject of death comes up.

2. The most appropriate time to talk about death is when it is part of the child's experience. The death of a pet or finding a dead bird provide "teachable moments" for dealing with the subject of death. Less personal experiences such as the death of a national leader, a popular entertainer, or death portrayed on a television drama might also generate questions and reactions from the young. All of these experiences provide avenues for communicating more openly and naturally with the child about death. With repeated discussions, a child becomes more comfortable with the subject and, in the process, is developing a foundation for dealing with death when it touches closer to life.

3. When answering a child's questions concerning death, give simple, direct, and honest information. Remember that a young child will have a different concept of death than does an adult; and the concept will change as the child matures. Try to determine exactly what the child is asking and respond accordingly; don't give information that is not asked for.

4. When discussing death with the child, use correct terminology. Words appropriate to the topic such as "died," "dead," "death,"

"casket," "funeral," and "grave" should be used. Euphemisms should be avoided because they may confuse the child. For example, the child may confuse the "passing" of a relative with his "passing" to the second grade; or daddy's "long journey" might be misinterpreted as daddy has deserted us; or "eternal sleep" may be confused with a normal night's sleep. Correct terminology provides more security because it conveys accuracy, reality, and honesty.

5. Counselors, clergymen, and death educators have long stressed the importance of openly expressing one's feelings in order to facilitate the acceptance of death—the final stage in the mourning process. Since all children will not react to death in the same manner, it is important to help them to reveal their true feelings. Perhaps the most important approach is active listening—patiently waiting until the child is ready to express himself, hearing what he is saying or is trying to say, and being accepting of whatever is said. Another way to draw the child into discussion is through the use of children's books of which there are several that deal with the subject of death (see Appendix A). Also, role playing, puppet play, and art activities provide opportunities for the child to express feelings, frustrations, and thoughts. By observing and analyzing the child's response to these kinds of activities, the adult is able to assess how the child copes in dealing with death.

6. A child's questions that lie within the religious or philosophical realm should be dealt with by parents in terms of their own religious faith or philosophical orientation. Parents who find this difficult might need the support and counsel of their clergy.

Religious Institutions

Religious institutions have traditionally played a significant role in death education by comforting the dying and the bereaved, by facilitating the funeral arrangements, and by providing a moral and spiritual context for death. With the increasing openness concerning the subject of death, religious institutions are assuming a greater responsibility by sponsoring study sessions, counseling groups, and providing crisis intervention services. Through these expanded roles, religious institutions are providing more direct educational services designed to help people improve their coping and caring capabilities.

The School

The need for formal approaches to death education in the curriculum has been well documented in professional literature. The following statements are exemplary:

So far schools have almost totally ignored the problem of death education, leaving it as a subject to be dealt with by parents and religious institutions. Neglect of the subject is probably due to the inability that exists in American culture to face death and the dilemma of how to deal with death so as to help students without distressing parents. However, if education is supposed to prepare children for life, death education must be included. (Clay, 1976, p. 179)

Schools can assist the child in the development of all three components of his set of death beliefs. Cognitive understanding can be increased; affective understanding can be clarified; and the resulting behavior can be understood. To accomplish this, death education should become part of the school's planned curriculum. (Moseley, 1976, p. 37)

Schools at all levels have responded to the call for death education with seminars, courses, workshops, as well as informal or incidental teaching. The school's responsibility for death education is complementary to that received in the home and church. Its role is to disseminate current and valid information, to explore philosophical thought, and to serve students' personal needs through its varied counseling services. The schools can help students take a more informed, objective look at the nature of death and dying and to integrate this understanding into a more productive life.

When death education is viewed as an ongoing process throughout the life cycle, the responsibility for it is shared by the home, church, other community agencies, and the schools. In the sections that follow, the authors will focus on the specific role of the school.

Goals of Death Education

"Death destroys a man; the idea of Death saves him."

—E. M. Forster

It may seem something of a paradox to state that the ultimate goal of death education is increased human happiness; but it is the authors' position that through learning about death, persons become more aware of life and, as a result, actually live life more fully.

Goals for death education programs have been compiled by Leviton; Grollman; Gordon and Klass; and the Department of Instruction, Minnesota Department of Education; among others. The following five goals are a synthesis of several goal statements. They reflect some of the basic concerns relative to death education:

1. To inform children and youth of basic facts concerning the multidimensional aspects of death and dying
2. To enable individuals to be informed consumers of medical and funeral services
3. To facilitate the improvement of the quality of life through thoughtful consideration of personal values and priorities
4. To enable children and youth to deal appropriately with feelings about their personal death and the deaths of meaningful others, and to cope more effectively when death becomes a reality
5. To assist individuals in the process of clarifying values related to social and ethical issues

It is apparent that goals 3, 4, and 5 are concerned with affective outcomes and, therefore, are controversial. However, to limit goals to only cognitive areas is impersonal and mechanistic. Clearly, both approaches are needed to provide balanced coverage of the topic. Following is the rationale for each goal.

Goal 1: To inform children and youth of basic facts concerning the multidimensional aspects of death and dying

Silence has long surrounded the topic of death. Even so, the omnipresent media are constantly delivering messages about death, both real and fanciful, to children and youth. News programs carry stories that vividly depict death as a result of war, revolution, and terrorist activity; also the deaths of national heroes or idols and of children in other parts of the world who are dying from disease and starvation. Television heroes and heroines blast their way in and out of predicaments with little respect for human life; and movies depict a variety of natural and manmade holocausts. Even cartoons and comic books present caricatures of torture and death. Such information creates distorted views of death in the minds of young people.

Scientific and technological advances affect human life and death. Manipulating life by genetic engineering, determining when death actually occurs, prolonging life by artificial means, and contaminating the atmosphere with environmental pollutants are but a few examples of a growing body of data that influences health and life and death. When society's traditional silence concerning death is combined with recent medical and technological advances and blended with the media's often inaccurate portrayal of death, the result is a group of young people who have a mixture of myth and misconception concerning death and dying.

Factual information, clearly presented, provides answers to specific questions and concerns young people have; it dissolves misconceptions and myths about death and relieves fears and anxieties. Knowledge of the legal restraints under which physicians work, medical definitions of death, death customs, normal stages of adjustment for the bereaved, and developmental concepts of death all help young people to formulate more profound inquiries about the real meaning of life.

Goal 2: To enable individuals to be informed consumers of medical and funeral services

Death, as well as impending death, forces decision making. Family members are faced with medical decisions regarding care of the dying. When death occurs, other decisions have to be made about the method of body disposal, place of burial, and type of funeral rite. Many of these decisions are subject to social, legal, and monetary constraints. Decisions have to be made quickly during a time of great emotional stress. These periods are not the best time for the reflection and planning needed for such important decisions. When properly informed about various medical and funeral services, persons can feel confident that when death occurs in the family they will be prepared to make sound decisions. Indeed, some individuals make arrangements for their own death by writing living wills, by making arrangements for organ donations and body disposal, and by preparing the format for their memorial service.

Goal 3: To facilitate the improvement of the quality of life through thoughtful consideration of personal values and priorities

Information about death, if properly taught, can help children and youth in confronting their own mortality in a positive way. As life and death are placed in perspective, the individual can begin to accept the certainty of death. This acceptance serves as a stimulus for establishing values and priorities that become an operational blueprint for one's life.

Goal 4: To enable children and youth to deal appropriately with feelings about their personal death and the deaths of meaningful others, and to cope more effectively when death becomes a reality

When communication about death is closed, unspoken feelings and thoughts concerning one's own death and the death of loved ones remain hidden or repressed. When parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, and pets die, the young must deal with the fears, anxieties, aggressions, and conflicts that arise. Death education helps individuals to cope with present and future bereavement and mourning. The ability to cope is fostered through a learning environment designed to under-

gird the individual with knowledge and understanding and with meaningful support from others. Concomitant outcomes are improved abilities in assisting others with bereavement and in interacting more freely and intelligently with those who are dying. Death education does not seek to eliminate fears associated with personal death, nor does it remove the pain and loss experienced when a loved one dies; but through learning and sharing, a healing process can emerge that makes coping more effective.

Goal 5: To assist individuals in the process of clarifying values related to social and ethical issues

For children and youth life is full of many choices involving personal values in such areas as drugs, sex, work, and play, that have both immediate and long-range consequences. At the same time, they are growing up in a society faced with global problems of overpopulation, environmental pollution, and malnutrition; also with ethical issues of euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, and prolonging life with mechanical devices, to mention a few. The field of death education also raises social and ethical issues in such areas as types and costs of burial, land use for cemeteries, and other aspects of caring for the dead. Decisions relative to many of these issues have both a personal and societal dimension. The following questions are examples of value-laden issues that young people face now and in the near future:

1. Am I doing things that may cause me or others to die unnecessarily and prematurely?
2. What responsibility do I have for overpopulation?
3. Who in our society shall be allowed to use life-prolonging devices, and who shall make the decisions?
4. Considering the scarcity of land, should we as a people continue the practice of allotting a burial plot for every person?

Essential to sound decision making on all these issues is the clarification of one's values. Death education, as well as other curriculum areas, provides an opportunity for youth to confront many of these issues and to clarify their values relative to personal decisions and societal choices.

Overview of Death Education Programs

While death education programs are proliferating, the precise number currently being offered at various levels is unknown. *Newsweek* (1 May 1978) quotes Robert Fulton, director, Center for Death Education and Research at the University of Minnesota, who estimated the number of courses on death and dying at the college and high school levels to be more than 1,000. A teaching unit on death co-authored by David Berg and George Daugherty is reportedly used in approximately 200 high schools in the U.S. At elementary, middle school, and junior high levels a variety of "packaged" programs are available; and several newspapers and journals have carried articles describing specific programs.

The audience for death education programs includes all ages from primary through college students and professional school personnel. Some courses have an affective orientation, while others have a more cognitive orientation. A growing number of elementary, middle, and junior high schools provide minicourses or units on the topic of death and dying. At high school and college levels units or courses are offered in various disciplines: health education, psychology, sociology, and literature.

Typical methods of instruction include: 1) incidental teaching when a death-related incident occurs (e.g., the death of a classroom pet); 2) an information-discussion approach utilizing films, filmstrips, outside speakers, field trips, and appropriate related literature; 3) an information-discussion approach with affective elements such as role

playing, values clarification activities, and writing activities; and 4) a self-instructional approach.

Content in Elementary and Middle Schools

Death education programs in elementary and middle schools are not widespread, but they are increasing. The content in such programs ranges from discussion of the death of a pet in kindergarten to a study of human death, burial, and bereavement in the upper grades.

For the primary grades topics typically include life cycles of plants and animals, death and separation, grief and its expression, and funeral and burial customs. The instructional approach usually involves activities and discussion based on real life experiences of children. For example, S. J. Burge used an activity called "My Lost Toy" with primary students. The guided discussion led to the question, "Do you think it is O.K. to feel sad, or even mad, when you lose something special?" Other topics were "A Pet I Loved" and "Annie's Dilemma" based on the book, *Annie and the Old One*, by Miska Miles.

Death education, by its very nature, lends itself to a multidisciplinary approach. This becomes apparent in the content for middle schools. For example, J. M. Mueller taught his students about death and dying by incorporating aspects of the topic into the spelling, composition, math, social studies, health, and music curricula. The following list of topics extracted from death education curricula for middle and junior high school illustrates the multidisciplinary nature of death education.

1. Life cycles in nature as manifested by plant and animal life
2. The human life cycle—birth, growth, aging, and death
3. Biological aspects—causes of death, determination of death
4. Social and cultural aspects—funeral and burial customs, vocabulary of death
5. Economic and legal aspects—insurance, wills, funeral consumerism
6. Aspects of grief, mourning, and bereavement
7. Aspects of death as presented in children's literature, music, and art

8. Religious viewpoints
9. Moral and ethical issues—suicide, euthanasia
10. Personal values related to life and death

Content in High School and College

As recently as early 1970, there were only a few death education programs at the high school and college levels. But as the decade drew to a close, programs had proliferated and covered a great variety of topics and concepts. Content in high school and college programs is quite similar, with differences primarily in depth of treatment at the college level.

C. A. Coor, after reviewing several courses on death and dying, consolidated the strengths of each into a model syllabus for a broad-scale, introductory course that includes 13 units.

1. Self-confrontation and value identification
2. Analysis of a portrait of death and dying
3. Social and cultural attitudes
4. Historical and demographic background
5. Defining and determining death
6. Euthanasia
7. Suicide
8. Socially approved deaths
9. Dealing with dying
10. Survivors and grieving
11. Body disposal, funeral practices, and other practical consequences
12. Children and death
13. Life, death, and human destiny

Another frequently cited source of content is J. McMahon's "Death Education: An Independent Study Unit" (*Journal of School Health*). The unit uses a behavioral objective for each of seven topics:

1. The taboo of death
2. Definitions of death: biological, social, and psychological
3. The crises of man
4. Views of death and dying

5. Understanding the dying patient or relative
6. The funeral, burial, and bereavement: psychological implications
7. Understanding suicide and self-destructive behaviors.

During the 1970s much progress was made in developing death education curricula, but the need still exists for improving the scope and sequence of content from kindergarten through college. This is the next challenge awaiting those who assume the responsibility for implementing death education programs in the curriculum.

Implementing Death Education Programs

During the 1970s the growth of death education programs was steady but somewhat unsystematic. Those who have been influential in the development of death education as a field of study are expressing concern for its future. As V. R. Pine states:

Death education is in the stage of development in which the future is neither etched in stone nor as malleable as newly formed clay. What is done at this juncture is critical to the future well-being of the field. Sophisticated teaching methods and the availability of vast amounts of material are not a substitute for clear thinking.

Death education does not yet have a standardized set of concepts, terminology, and guidelines, and has no established place in the curriculum. Far more issues have been raised than resolved. Questions relative to incorporating death education into school and college programs will require continued research. Meanwhile educators must give immediate attention to the following concerns:

1. What kind of planning is needed to implement death education?
2. Who should be responsible for death education and what should be their qualifications?
3. What needs to be known about the student prior to participation in death education?
4. Should death education begin with kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, or higher education?
5. How should curricula experiences differ in order to accommodate variances in the developmental rates of students?

6. At what point in the death education continuum should controversial concepts be introduced to children and youth?
7. What teaching techniques are most effective?
8. What materials are needed for death education?

Planning and Evaluation

Planning for death education should be on a schoolwide or systemwide basis. A broad-based planning committee should involve not only school personnel but also parents, students, and representative community groups such as the medical profession, the clergy, mental health personnel, and the funeral and legal professions. The initial tasks of the planning committee are to draft a statement of philosophy, to identify the broad goals of death education, and to design a plan for implementation and evaluation.

The next step is determining the interests, knowledge, and attitudes of students concerning death, and surveying community attitudes toward death education. With a topic that is so value-laden and so close to the lives of all people, community attitudes must be known if death education is to be accepted into the curriculum. Further, an awareness of student and community knowledge and attitudes relative to death and dying is important in selecting content and planning experiences for students.

Comprehensive staff development programs are essential if schoolwide implementation of death education is to occur. Orientation of administrative and support staff, particularly counselors, is as important as preparation of teachers. Many advocates of death education also stress the importance of community education programs to gain the support of parents and community agencies.

Two other vital planning tasks are the selection and/or development of appropriate curriculum materials and the identification of instructional strategies to deal with moral, ethical, and theological considerations. With both of these tasks, planning must take into consideration the readiness of the community and compatibility with community value systems.

A final consideration in the planning process is a strategy for evaluation that is consistent with the death education program's

philosophy and objectives. The evaluation process should start with the initiation of the program. Just as planning should involve school personnel, members of the community, and students, so should the evaluation process be a cooperative effort. Input from all these groups is needed to provide direction for needed program changes. Evaluation of death education programs should be comprehensive, ongoing, and include death education components at all grade levels. The outcomes of evaluation should be communicated to students and the community. Responsiveness to feedback will increase the likelihood that death education will succeed in becoming a viable part of the curriculum.

The Student and Death Education

Those involved in developing a death education program should be familiar with the growing body of literature that deals with how children deal with death at various stages of their development. Robert Kastenbaum, in *New Meanings of Death*, suggests four types of information useful in determining how a particular child interprets death:

1. Developmental level of children will determine the limits within which they can comprehend any phenomena.
2. Individual personalities of children will influence their interpretations of death.
3. Life experiences such as the death of a parent, prolonged separations from parents, frequent moves by families, illness, and other experiences may color children's perception of death.
4. Open communication and support within a family often pay off when all members are confused and frightened in the midst of a crisis situation.

Another contribution to understanding children's developmental concepts of death is the pioneering work of Maria Nagy. By examining drawings, written compositions, and recorded conversations of children ages 3 to 10, she has identified three developmental stages.

In Stage I, ages 3 to 5, death is denied as finality. It is seen as a departure, a further existence in changed circumstances, similar to a state of sleep.

In Stage II, approximately ages 5 or 6 to 9, death is viewed to be

final, but with the possibility of an "escape hatch." During this stage death is often personified as an outside agent, possibly in the form of a skeleton. If clever, fortunate, and careful, one might not be caught by the "death-man."

In Stage III, around the ages of 9 or 10, the child begins to understand that death is personal, universal, inevitable, and final. In Nagy's words, "At this age not only the conception as to death is realistic, but also a general view of the world." As the individuals mature they are no longer limited to the concrete thought operations of the child; however, both personality and lifestyle continue to be important factors in a child's concepts and attitudes about death.

In general, Nagy's work has proved to be fairly accurate; however, later studies have questioned the personification tendencies of children and the exact age level at which concepts about death emerge. More research is needed to arrive at definite answers concerning a child's understanding of death. Those who develop curriculum in death education must apprise themselves of current research, only a little of which is surveyed in this fastback.

Qualifications for Teaching Death Education

Whether taught by regular classroom teachers, school counselors, or health educators, death education requires special training and certain personal qualifications. Warren R. Johnson in his book, *Human Sexual Behavior and Sex Education*, has described five criteria that relate specifically to qualifications of the sex educator. These same criteria can be used for death educators by substituting death-related terminology for sexual terminology. A paraphrase of these five criteria follows:

1. Teachers must come to terms with their own death feelings and admit their existence in the dynamics of their total personality functioning.
2. The teachers need to know the appropriate death-related subject matter that they are to teach.
3. Teachers of death education need to be able to use the language of death easily and naturally, especially in the presence of the young.
4. Teachers need to be familiar with the sequence of developmental

concepts about death throughout life, and to have a sympathetic understanding of common problems associated with them.

5. Teachers need to be aware of the enormous social changes that are in progress and of their implications for changes in our attitudes, practices, laws, and institutions concerning death.

Other authorities in the death education movement have pointed to the importance of attentive listening, sensitivity of the topic for individual students, and knowledge of counseling and referral techniques. School systems planning to introduce death education to the curriculum should use these criteria for selecting staff to teach in the program. Educators can also use these criteria as a self-assessment tool for determining if they have the personal qualifications to work effectively in this field.

Criteria for Selecting Death Education Materials

Publishers and writers of books for children, youth, and adults are increasingly aware of the growing interest in the topic of death and dying and are publishing materials and writing books to meet a growing demand in this area. There are also numerous resources available to use in developing programs and courses in death education for personal study and growth.

Marianne Everett Gideon, writing in *Death Education*, has presented guidelines for evaluating death education materials. The general criteria are summarized by the following questions:

1. Are the materials adaptable for multiple use?
2. Is the information accurate?
3. Are there suggested guidelines for using the material?
4. Are there appropriate references and bibliographies for both teachers and students?
5. Is the death education curriculum material of adequate quality?
6. Is the material readily available?
7. Are the results from previous use in field tests or pilot programs reported?
8. Is the cost of the materials within the budget of the school system?

While an exhaustive list of resources is beyond the scope of this fast-

back, selected available resources are listed in the References and Appendices sections. Educators are well advised, as with most curriculum materials, to adapt materials to meet the needs of the students served rather than to adopt them wholesale.

Cautions in Implementing Death Education Programs

Dealing with controversial material inherent in death education dictates that certain precautions be taken. In our legitimate concern to deal with a relevant social issue, we should exercise great care not to push children into dealing with concepts they are not ready to handle. The readiness of children and adolescents to deal with the topic is vital in developing a successful death education program.

Parents should be involved at the outset. Interested parents should be provided a time and place to meet with the educators to discuss questions, make suggestions, or perhaps even to volunteer as resource persons. Proposed programs should be monitored for possible community reactions through meetings with such groups as the PTA, through letters to parents explaining the program, and through involvement of key community resource personnel.

Wise planning, of course, is the key to effective implementation of a death education program. Educators must carefully consider such factors as the age range, maturity levels, cultural/religious backgrounds, and readiness of the learners in coping with and being receptive to the topic.

Teachers should not dwell on the morbid, sensational, or macabre elements of death, and should at all times be sensitive to the emotional and mental maturity of their students. Children are frequently egocentric and tend to internalize events in their environment that they think may apply to themselves. In the case of death education, young children might become frightened that the same thing that happened to their loved one might also happen to them. Teachers should reassure children that they should not expect to die soon. Young children will profit from opportunities to discuss events that may be cognitively and emotionally difficult for them to comprehend. In the course of discussions with children, patient and supportive teachers should reassure them that death is natural and that expressions of sadness and

mourning are acceptable emotions that can and should be expressed without shame or fear.

Teaching about death and dying can lead to a more intense appreciation of the wonders of life. However, it is important that educators be aware of their constituent families' beliefs regarding death so that children are not given conflicting types of information.

Conclusion

Death education has passed over the invisible threshold of social acceptance and has been embraced by serious scholars, researchers, and educators. These dedicated leaders point out potential problems that must be met in order to insure high standards in the field.

- The proliferation of ill-conceived death education courses may drive out good ones. Carefully conceived, scrupulously documented courses in death education are required to provide beneficial outcomes to individuals and society.

- Death education is in danger of becoming compartmentalized. Its multidisciplinary base must be maintained.

- Teachers of death education must be prepared to provide leadership in the field. Carefully planned staff development programs and teacher preparation courses in death education are necessary to provide teachers and prospective teachers with basic knowledge and skills.

- In the rush to educate, new research concerning dying, death, bereavement, grief, and mourning must not be neglected. There is an increasing need for empirical research in death education.

- There is the possibility that death education could be corrupted as a means of conditioning people to kill or die for ignoble causes. One needs only to remember the 1979 tragedy at Jonestown in Guyana to underscore this warning.

- There is a danger that death education may be used to provide an illusion of knowledge and control that becomes a form of "denial by acceptance." By focusing only on the process of dying, the real intellectual, emotional, and social challenges of death are ignored. The scope of death education is more global than simply its cognitive elements. It

has potential for helping to clarify such social issues as euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, and war. Increasing evidence shows that behaviors such as alcoholism, drug abuse, personal violence, and other destructive acts also may be linked to overt or latent meanings of death for individuals.

Solomon Grundy's "Mondays" and "Saturdays" of life depict the history of humankind. Alpha and omega are reality. As life passes for each human being, there are beginnings and endings, sunrises and sunsets; but for all, omega is inevitable. With death education the "Saturdays" can be accepted and life can become more beautiful and fulfilling—the true omega.

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Appendix A: Print Materials

Preschool to age 7

Abbott, S. *Old Dog*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972.

This is the story of a young boy who is lonely after the dog he loves dies.

Brown, M. W. *The Dead Bird*. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, 1965.

Children find a dead bird, have a funeral for it, and return to their play.

de Paola, T. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. New York: Putnam, 1973.

Four-year-old Tommy has two Nanas—one, a great-grandmother who is bedridden and lives upstairs, and the other, a grandmother who is active and lives downstairs. Each dies, but Tommy finds that a hope of life after death brings satisfaction.

Fassler, J. *My Grandpa Died Today*. New York: Behavioral Publications, 1971.

Grandpa dies. David learns that despite his pain, he can continue "to go right on playing and reading, and running, and laughing, and growing up."

Harris, A. *Why Did He Die?* Minneapolis: Lerner, 1965.

Such typical questions as, Is granddad dead for good? Will you and father die soon? If he (granddad) is dead and cannot move, is he buried in the ground? are answered in a warm reassuring manner by a mother talking with her son.

Miles, M. *Annie and the Old One*. Boston: Little Brown, 1971.

Annie's Navajo grandmother tells her that after the new rug is woven, "I will go to Mother Earth." To postpone the death, Annie tries to prevent the rug from being completed. The Old One talks to the girl and she accepts the impending death.

Viorst, J. *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. New York: Atheneum, 1971.

Barney the cat dies. The child tries to think of 10 good things to say about him at his funeral. The "tenth thing" helps the child understand and accept death.

Zolotow, C. *My Grandson Lew*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Lewis misses his grandpa, but he and his mother are comforted as they share their memories of him and the remembrances of love he brought to the family.

Ages 8 through 11

Bleau, R. *Grandma Didn't Wave Back*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1970.

Debbie finds it difficult to adjust to the growing senility of her grandmother. It is her grandmother who finally helps Debbie understand the changes that must take place.

Cleaver, V. *Grover*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970.

Ten-year-old Grover learns to adjust to the changes in his life brought about by the suicide of his ailing mother. Time, friends, and maturity help him overcome his sorrow.

Cohen, B. *Thank You, Jackie Robinson*. New York: Lothrop, 1974.

The only person who shared 12-year-old Sam Greene's enthusiasm for the Brooklyn Dodgers was Davey, a 60-year-old black man who cooked in Mrs. Greene's restaurant. After Davey's death, Sam truly grieves over the loss of his best friend.

Corley, E. A. *Tell Me About Death: Tell Me About Funerals*. Santa Clara, Calif.: Grammatical Sciences, 1973.

Such questions as, What is a funeral home, embalmer, casket, pallbearer, hearse, and mausoleum? are answered for a child within the context of his grandfather's death.

LeShan, E. *What Makes Me Feel This Way?* New York: Macmillan, 1972.

Chapter ten deals with the emotions surrounding the fear of death and dying and emphasizes two important ideas: 1) When someone dies, we realize how precious his life was. 2) Death also reminds us of how precious life is and how much we want to make our lives matter.

Smith, D. B. *A Taste of Blackberries*. New York: Crowell, 1973.

Jamie dies of a bee sting. His best friend must confront grief and guilt feelings before learning that life goes on.

Wagner, J. J. *T. T.* New York: Dell, 1969.

J. T. is a 10-year-old boy living in Harlem. He and his mother are poor because J. T.'s father deserted them, leaving them nothing. J. T. shares his love by befriendng a cat. Two boys tease J. T. about his cat and begin to throw it around. The cat is run over by a car and killed. J. T. learns a lot about life through the death of his cat.

White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Harper & Row, 1952.

When Charlotte the spider dies, her friends take her eggs back to the farm where they can safely hatch. These friends, Templeton the rat and Wilbur the pig, know that no friendship can ever equal the special friendship Charlotte gave to them.

Whitehead, R. *The Mother Tree*. New York: Seabury, 1971.

Set in West Texas in the early 1900s, this is the story of a 10-year-old girl whose mother dies suddenly. Because of the death, the girl must take care of her 4-year-old sister (who asks, "When will mother come home again?") and assume the role as housekeeper for her father and brother. A grandmother helps her accept her acquired role.

Zim, H. and Bleeker, S. *Life and Death*. New York: Morrow, 1970.

This factual book answers many questions concerning death itself and the customs and attitudes surrounding death.

Older youth

Cleaver, V. and Cleaver, B. *Where the Lilies Bloom*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969.

This book is about a poor family living in the mountains. After the death of the father, the family responsibilities fall on a 15-year-old girl. The family shows courage as they plan for the survival of the family and the burying of their father.

Koch, R. *Goodbye Grandpa*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975.

Joey is full of energy and loves life. When he hears that Grandpa Lane is dying, he is afraid. When his grandpa is transferred to a nursing home, Joey refuses to visit him despite the wishes of his mother and grandfather. A special "accident" in Joey's life helps him understand that often people need to do what they do not like to do. The family's faith in God sees them through the death of Grandpa Lane.

Langone, J. *Death is a Noun: A View of the End of Life*. Boston: Little Brown, 1972.

Discusses some of the difficult ethical, legal, and religious questions regarding death from different points of view, but encourages readers to make their own judgments. Topics covered are: When does death occur?, facing death, euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, murder, and suicide.

Levit, R. *Ellen: A Short Life Long Remembered*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1974.

At the age of 15, Ellen's life is ending and her exceptional promise cannot be realized. Ellen's story, told through her own poems and her mother's narrative, is a testimonial to the strength of the human spirit.

Lund, D. *Eric*. New York: Lippincott, 1974.

A young man learns at the age of 17 that he has leukemia. This story recounts the loneliness of those who suffer and the courage required to perform in normal situations despite their grief.

Rhodin, E. *The Good Greenwood*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971.

Mike's best friend, Louie, dies. After a period of grief, Mike begins to remember the good times they had together and to appreciate Louie for what he was.

Slote, A. *Hang Tough, Paul Mather*. New York: Lippincott, 1973.

For Paul Mather, pitching a baseball was his life. Afflicted with an incurable disease, Paul accepts that he has only a short time left to play and faces, with the help of a doctor friend, his "short season" with dignity and courage.

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Adult-to-child reading

- Grollman, E. A. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. Boston: Beacon, 1970.

This read-along picture book explains death to the young child and provides an extensive guide for parents.

- LeShan, E. *What Makes Me Feel This Way?* New York: Macmillan, 1972.

See annotation under "Ages 8 through 11."

- Stein, S. B. *About Dying*. New York: Walker, 1974.

The book discusses the death of a bird, "Snow," and of the grandfather who gave "Snow" to the children. Vivid photographs accompany the text for the adult and the child.

- Zim, H., and Bleeker, S. *Life and Death*. New York: Morrow, 1970.

See annotation under "Ages 8 through 11."

Professional

- Anthony, S. *The Child's Discovery of Death*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940.

This is one of the first comprehensive studies made on the subject of children and death. Provides good background for the educator.

- Cook, S. S., ed. *Children and Dying*. New York: Health Sciences, 1974.

Helpful chapters include: "Children's Perceptions of Death," "A Look at Death in Children's Poetry," "Understanding Teenagers' Response to Death," "Explaining Death to Children," "A Discussion of Concepts and a Bibliography," and "Helping Children Cope with Death."

- Feifel, H., ed. *The Meaning of Death*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959.

This is a classic collection of readings about the many facets of death and dying. The list of contributors includes: Carl Jung, Robert Kastenbaum, Maria Nagy, Edgar Jackson, David Mandelbaum, Edwin Shneidman, and others.

- Green, B. R., and Irish, D. P., eds. *Death Education: Preparation for Living*. Cambridge: Schenkman, 1971.

Helpful chapters include: "The Role of the School in Providing Death Education," "The Meaning of Death in American Society—Implications for Education," and "Death Education: Preparation for Living."

- Grollman, E. A., ed. *Explaining Death to Children*. Boston: Beacon, 1967.

This is a collection of readings concerning the many facets of death and dying as they relate to the child. Includes articles by Robert Fulton, Robert Kastenbaum, Hella Moller, Edgar Jackson, and others.

- _____. *Concerning Death: A Practical Guide for the Living*. Boston: Beacon, 1974.
- Chapter four, "Children and Death," offers answers for educators and parents for such questions as: Can youngsters truly understand death? How should it be explained? Is it unwise to take the child to the funeral? How does the youngster respond to separation? What are the significant guidelines for helping the child during crises?
- Kastenbaum, R., and Aisenburg, R. *The Psychology of Death*. New York: Springer, 1976.
- Provides extensive coverage of the many facets of death and dying. A basic text for any educator.
- Kubler-Ross, E. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- _____. *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1974.
- _____. *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.
- _____. *Images of Growth and Death*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976.
- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is perhaps the best-known writer today in the field of death and dying. A review of her books will aid the educator in coming to grips with his/her own feelings concerning death.
- Mills, G. et al. *Discussing Death: A Guide to Death Education*. Homewood, Ill.: ETC Publications, 1976.
- This curriculum guide (K-12) will aid the teacher in incorporating the study of death into the curriculum.
- Stanford, G. and Perry, D. *Death Out of the Closet: A Curriculum Guide to Living with Dying*. New York: Bantam, 1976.
- This book contains a wealth of ideas, suggestions, and resources regarding death education in the secondary school curriculum.

Appendix B: Audio-Visual Materials

Filmstrips and kits

Families in Crises. 8 filmstrips and 8 cassettes, grades 7-12. Titles in the series: *Divorce, Occupational Stress, A Handicapped Child, Coping with Death, Care of the Aged, Financial Reverses, Pulling Up Roots, A Brush with the Law.* Available from Coronet, 65 E. So. Water Street, Chicago, IL 60601. (\$120)

Crisis strikes. What then? These case studies of problems in family living offer alternatives and open questions. Documentary-style interviews with real-life families probe the effects of crises on careers and family relationships, as well as the institutions and societal attitudes involved.

Perspectives on Death by David W. Berg and George G. Daugherty. 2 color filmstrips, 2 phonotapes, *Teachers' Resource Book, Student Activity Book*, and an *Anthology of Readings*, ages 12 and up. Titles in the series: *Funeral Customs Around the World, Death Through the Eyes of the Artist, Death Themes in Literature* and *Death Themes in Music.* Available from Educational Perspectives Associates, P.O. Box 213, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Understanding Changes in the Family. 5 filmstrips and 5 cassettes, discussion guide, grades K-3. Titles in the series: *What's a Family?; Little Brother, Big Pest!; We're Adopted!; Not Together Any More;* and *Playing Dead.* Roles of children, parents, and other adults are examined. Family cooperation, sibling jealousy, feelings of parental rejection, similarities of adoptive to non-adoptive homes, reasons for divorce, children's reactions to divorce, and common fears and questions about death all are emphasized. Available from Guidance Associates, 757 Third Ave., New York, NY 10017. (\$77.50)

Understanding Death by David W. Berg and George G. Daugherty. 4 filmstrips, phonotapes and *Children and Death: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*, ages 7-11. Titles in the series: *Life-Death, Exploring the Cemetery, Facts about Funerals,* and *A Taste of Blackberries* (Adapted from book by D. B. Smith). Available from Educational Perspectives Associates, P.O. Box 213, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Understanding Death: A Basic Program in Death and Dying. 6 color filmstrips and 3 phonotapes, ages 12 and up. Titles in the series: *Thinking About Death, Mourning Becomes Us All, Practical Guidelines, Death's Moment and the Time that Follows, Dying Occurs in Stages,* and *The Gift of Life.*

Many death-related topics are considered in an effort to foster better understanding of this aspect of the life cycle. Available from Eye Gate Media, 146-01 Archer Avenue, Jamaica, NY 11435.

Films for use with children and youth

Annie and the Old One. 16 mm, 16 min., col., rental/\$9.25, Indiana University Audio Visual Center, Bloomington, IN 47405.

Explores the concepts of death and time through the story of Annie, a Navajo girl, and her grandmother, the Old One. Grandmother knows that she will rejoin the earth when the rug she is weaving is finished. Annie attempts to prevent the rug from being finished. Based on Miska Miles's book by the same title.

Big Boys Don't Cry. 16 mm, 8 min., col., rental/\$6. Indiana University Audio Visual Center, Bloomington, IN 47405.

Follows a young boy as he practices shooting his BB gun in a forest. Captures the boy's distress as he kills a bird and must confront the dead animal. Intercuts scenes of gunfights from Westerns and wartime executions, drawing parallels between the seemingly unrelated events.

The Day Grandpa Died. 16 mm, 11½ min., col., rental/\$15. Purchase/\$105. BFA Educational Media, 221 Michigan Avenue, Santa Monica, CA 90406.

"Grandpa went to sleep last night, David—and he didn't wake up." In this vignette of a boy's first experience with the death of a loved one, we watch David's struggle with the reality, from outright denial of the fact to gradual acceptance of death as a part of life. Provides a sensitive and understanding treatment of a subject often considered by children but seldom discussed with them by adults.

Death: Coping With Loss. 16 mm, 19 min., col., purchase/\$275. Coronet, 65 E. So. Water Street, Chicago, IL 60601.

For young people for whom death is remote, parents who have experienced recent loss, individuals facing imminent death, and people who deal with death on a professional level talk about the subject. They discuss fears about dying, responses to loss, purpose of funerals, comforting the bereaved, and religious considerations of life after death. Junior High through adult.

Death: How Can You Live With It? 16 mm, 19 min., col., rental/\$25. Purchase/\$305. Walt Disney Educational Media Co., 11 Quine St., Cranford, NJ 07016. Grades 4-9.

In My Memory. 16 mm, 14½ min., col., rental/\$6.75. Inside/Out Series Film, Agency for Instructional Television, Box A, Bloomington, IN 47402. Purdue University, Audio Visual Center, Lafayette, IN 47907.

When her grandmother dies, Linda tries to understand what this event means to her own life and how to accept it as a natural part of the human condition. Ages 8 to 10.

The Magic Moth. 16 mm, 22 min., col., rental/\$13.80. AVD Media Library, Audio Visual Center, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52240.

Depicted is the death of a young family member and the psychological and philosophical questions both the adults and children are faced with during the crisis.

My Grandson Lew. 16 mm, 13 min., col., rental/\$8. Purchase/\$220. Barr Films, P.O. Box 5667 or 3490 East Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107. Visual Aids Service, University of Illinois, Division of University Extension, Champaign, IL 61822.

Thoughts of his grandfather keep Lew awake long after his bedtime. Grandpa has not visited him for a long time and Lew misses him. Finally, he goes to his mother and she listens quietly as Lew shares his memories of Grandpa. Then she explains that Grandpa will not visit him again—Grandpa died. She tells Lew about her favorite memory of Grandpa, and for just a moment the wonderful old man seems to be there with them. Lew slowly grasps the meaning of his mother's words and realizes the importance and joy of sharing memories with loved ones. (Based on the book by Charlotte Zolotow)

My Turtle Died Today. 16 mm, 8 min., col., rental/\$5.50. Indiana University Audio Visual Center, Bloomington, IN 47405.

Uses animation to tell of a boy who finds a turtle and cares for it, but it gets sick and dies. Intertwines the turtle's death with the birth of kittens to point out the inevitability of death and the continuity of life. Draws a parallel between this story and human life, birth, and death.

Films for older youth

Problem? . . . To Think of Dying. 16 mm, 59 min., col., rental/\$20.75. Purchase/\$635. Indiana University Audio Visual Center, Bloomington, IN 47405.

To Be Aware of Death. 16 mm, 15 min., col., rental/\$11. Pennsylvania State University, Audio Visual Services, University Park, PA 16802.

A montage of comments reflecting attitudes toward death and dying, funerals, and life after death. Promotes awareness that there are stages to dying and that these stages can be anticipated and dealt with by family, key medical personnel, and spiritual advisors.

Where Is Dead? 16 mm, 19 min., col., rental/\$10.25. Purchase/\$225. Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 425 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611. Indiana University Audio Visual Center, Bloomington, IN 47405.

Low-keyed drama deals compassionately, yet realistically, with a subject that young children may be forced to face: the death of a loved one. Six-year-old Sarah plays and fights with her nine-year-old brother, David, in a series of recognizable childhood vignettes. David's sudden death rends the family fabric. Sarah's parents attempt to explain what has happened—with tenderness but without sentimentality. Gradually, the little girl is able to cope with her feelings of sadness, confusion, and fear, and life regains most of its earlier joys.